

CHAPTER I

What Is Women's Studies?



Before the late 1960s there were no women's studies courses. Most college courses focused on male experience, and women were shadowy, marginal figures. The resurgence of feminism in the late 1960s led students and faculty to ask "Where are the women?" and work to establish courses that focused on women's experiences. Today there are women's studies programs throughout the world, close to 1,000 of them in the United States.

What is women's studies? You will probably hear this question often when you tell people that you are taking women's studies classes. Despite the spectacular growth in women's studies programs and courses in the past four decades, some faculty members and students still view women's studies as marginal to the main business of the university. Yet to countless others, women's studies is an important and exciting experience that introduces new ways of seeing both the world and oneself. Women's studies courses investigate women's experiences, perspectives, and contributions, placing women at the center of inquiry.

As Barrie Thorne has pointed out, women's studies has been a two-pronged project: it has created courses within disciplines, such as women and literature or sociology of women, that seek to incorporate the experiences of women into the subject matter of the disciplines. But the boundaries that separate the disciplines begin to blur and appear arbitrary when we seek to answer questions about women's lives. The second prong of the women's studies project, therefore, is to create interdisciplinary courses and lines of inquiry. The introduction to women's studies courses in most colleges is an example of an interdisciplinary course that draws on theory and approaches from a variety of disciplines to render women's lives visible.¹ Women's studies scholars working both within and across disciplines have generated new concepts and approaches to understanding the world. A basic premise of women's studies is that we cannot understand the world without understanding women's experiences, perspectives, and contributions.

A women's studies approach to education emphasizes an interactive learning process that challenges students intellectually and emotionally. Women's studies emerged from the questions women asked about their own experiences as well as about the subjects they were studying, and this process remains a central part of a women's studies education. Women's studies instructors usually encourage students to ask questions of the material and to bring their own experiences to bear on the material they are studying. Learning to ask such questions is part of crafting what Cynthia Enloe calls a "*feminist curiosity*." "Using a *feminist curiosity*," she explains, means "asking questions about the condition of women—and about relationships of women to each other and about relationships of women to men." While asking such questions can be difficult, Enloe also tells us it can be "energizing," as it "motivates one to treat as puzzling the relationships of women to any aspect of social life and nature that other people take for granted."²

¹Barrie Thorne, "A Telling Time for Women's Studies," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000), p. 1183.

²Cynthia Enloe, *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 10.

Women's studies instructors see themselves as resources and guides in this process, not as authorities who are handing down knowledge to passive recipients. The values of feminism, including a critique of all forms of domination, an emphasis on cooperation, and a belief in the integration of theory and practice, have shaped an approach to teaching termed feminist pedagogy, which makes the women's studies classroom an interactive learning environment. The realities of schooling in the United States contradict these approaches to learning. Education has often been a bittersweet experience for women. We expect that knowledge of our world can be empowering, enabling us to change our lives and our communities. For many women, particularly those of us who have experienced racial or ethnic discrimination, educational achievement assures greater access to resources and opportunities. But the educational institutions of our society have too often been limiting, rather than empowering, for women. The practices of educational institutions frequently encourage girls and women to pursue occupations in traditionally "female" areas rather than in traditionally "male" domains such as math and the sciences. Schools and teachers tend to reinforce girls' compliance and passivity rather than their assertiveness and inquisitiveness. Men have historically exercised authority in institutions of higher learning, determining "valid" areas of inquiry and "legitimate" methods of analysis and research. In sum, the dominant message is that human experience equals male experience. Sometimes this message is overt, but it is sometimes so subtle and deeply embedded in the educational experience that we are not aware of it. There has been some progress in the past four decades, but for the most part the massive outpouring of research by women's studies scholars has not been integrated into mainstream education.

Women's studies was born out of the conviction that women are worth learning about and that understanding women's experiences helps us to change the condition of women. Emerging from the feminist movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, women's studies courses and programs were deeply political. The Buffalo Women's Studies Program asserted, for example, "This education will not be an academic exercise; it will be an ongoing process to change the ways in which women think and behave. It must be part of the struggle to build a new and more complete society."³ From their beginnings in the 1960s, women's studies courses spread rapidly across the country. By 1989, over 500 colleges in the United States had women's studies programs. In the past 40 years, thousands of books and articles about women have been published, challenging old assumptions and charting new territory. Today, women's studies has become part of the academy and offers majors, minors, master's degrees, and, at a more than a dozen universities, doctorates in women's studies. Women's studies flourishes in conferences, workshops, journals, and research institutes and in countless Internet sites and discussion lists.

As feminist scholars began to chart female experience, they sometimes found the available vocabulary inadequate and confusing. As a result, feminist scholarship has generated several new words or has endowed familiar words with new meaning.

³Quoted in Florence Howe and Carol Ahlum, "Women's Studies and Social Change," in *Academic Women on the Move*, ed. Alice Rossi and Ann Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage, 1973), p. 420.

The word *gender*, for example, used to pertain only to grammar but has come to mean the socially constructed behaviors and characteristics that are associated with each sex. While gender is a social category, the word *sex* applies to the physiological identities of women and men. The distinction between sex and gender enables us to see that the particular expectations for women and men in our culture are neither immutable nor universal. Recently, however, feminist scholars have argued that sex itself is not a purely biological category but has been powerfully shaped by gender. For many years, for example, doctors have insisted that sexually ambiguous genitalia be surgically altered so that they fit into the prevailing divisions between male and female, thereby showing the power of gender to constitute sex.⁴ In addition, scholars have pointed out that the social construction of gender is a complex process in which individuals and groups sometimes challenge gender norms. Tina Chanter suggests that we think of sex and gender as always a dynamic relation and the distinctions between the two realms as not fixed or rigid but malleable and flexible.⁵

The word *sexism* appeared because the available phrase *sex discrimination* did not adequately describe the pervasive bias against women in our culture. Sexism therefore has come to mean behaviors, attitudes, and institutions based on the assumption of male superiority. The term *patriarchy* refers to “power of the fathers” and is used by feminists in two ways: (1) to describe a society in which older men are in positions of power; and (2) to describe a male-dominated society. This new vocabulary has been instrumental in shaping the ways in which we now think about the experiences of women and girls in our society.

Over the past four decades women's studies has developed and changed as it seeks to more effectively understand the lives of all women. Initially women scholars endeavored to address the absence of women in the literature of varied academic areas by uncovering women's achievements. For example, psychology has benefited from the work of scholars who focused on the important contributions to psychological research made by women such as Mamie Phipps Clark, Carolyn Sherif, and Margaret Harlow. It quickly became apparent, however, that the central concepts of many academic disciplines excluded women or assumed women's inferiority to men. Even the language used to describe these concepts and ideas is often laden with assumptions about female inferiority. Some 20 years ago, the anthropologist Emily Martin, for instance, exposed how “scientific” descriptions of the egg and the sperm relied on stereotyped notions of male and female roles, while also reinforcing widely held myths about male and female power.⁶ But as Gowri Parameswaran points out, over the past few decades women have reshaped the field of biology to question these assumptions by pointing to the egg's active role in fertilization.

⁴Ann Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁵Tina Chanter, “Gender Aporias,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25, no. 4 (2000), p. 1241. See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Ann Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.

⁶Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16 (1991), pp. 485–501.

In the field of history, for example, subject matter was traditionally limited to the public arena, such as political parties, wars, and the economy. The domestic world, where many women spent a great deal of their time, was considered trivial or irrelevant, and the relationship between the domestic and public worlds was ignored. In literature, the very definition of great literature, or “the canon,” was based on standards that white male authors generated. Feminist anthropologists have demonstrated the important contributions women make in forging societies and have examined the status of women in relationship to public and private activities. Some fields have been more resistant to the influence of feminist scholarship. By emphasizing the contributions of women, critically challenging the conceptual frameworks underlying traditional scholarship, and presenting theory and research focusing on women's experiences, women's studies is transforming the terrain of human knowledge. When women are placed at the center of inquiry, everything changes dramatically, as if a kaleidoscope has been turned.

As Michael Kimmel points out, “Women's studies has made gender visible.”⁷ Thus, examining gender is more than examining women's lives; it also includes acknowledging the enormous influence of gender on all of our lives. Boys' and men's experiences are powerfully affected by ideas about masculinity and femininity. Women's studies has, as a result, generated the broader field of gender studies. Gender studies examines the ways that ideas about the social relations of women and men structure our politics and culture and the way we all experience our world. By reaffirming the significance of gender in our lives, gender studies is very much related to women's studies in its content. Elizabeth Minnich aptly describes this complementary relationship: “Gender Studies requires Women's Studies, just as Women's Studies requires the study of gender. One does not substitute for the other; they are mutually enriching.”⁸

The ideas of feminism have inspired the development of women's studies theory and courses. The term *feminism* refers to the belief that women have been historically subordinate to men as well as to the commitment to working for freedom for women in all aspects of social life. Though feminist beliefs, values, and practices are continually evolving, reflecting new ideas, movements, and historical research, it is clear that similar values have informed the lives and work of many different groups of women, even when they may not have identified their beliefs as “feminist.” Paula Gunn Allen, a Native American writer, pointed out that roots of contemporary feminism can be found in many Native American cultures.⁹ Some of these societies were gynarchies (societies governed by women) that were egalitarian, pacifist, and spiritually based. These values and practices are comparable to those of

⁷Michael Kimmel, “Men and Women's Studies: Premises, Perils, and Promise,” in *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys and Political Critiques*, ed. Nancy Hewitt, Jean O'Barr, and Nancy Rosebaugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 154.

⁸Elizabeth Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 139.

⁹Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 213.

present-day feminism, such as cooperation and respect for human freedom. As we understand the varied ways in which women have worked toward self-determination in different contexts and cultures throughout history, the definition of feminism becomes broader and richer.

The word *feminism* originated in France and was introduced into this country in the early 1900s after efforts to expand women's political rights had been flourishing throughout the world for many decades.¹⁰ The women who first identified themselves as feminist in the early twentieth century believed that the "emancipation of women" required changes in the relations between women and men and between women and the family, as well as between women and the state.

For many women, the goal of freedom for women was inextricably linked with the end of all forms of domination. Women of color, in particular, saw the connections between sexual and racial oppression. African-American activists like Anna Cooper argued for a women's movement that challenged all forms of domination and made alliances with all oppressed peoples.

U.S. historians often refer to the movement that began in the nineteenth century and culminated with the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote, as the first wave of feminism. The legal, educational, and political achievements of the movement were considerable, despite the fact that it faced enormous opposition to every demand. Yet the organizations that led the movement did not speak for all women and often refused to seriously consider the concerns of African-American and immigrant women. The history of the suffrage movement demonstrates how race and class divisions can prevent a movement from working effectively to achieve freedom for all women.

In the decades after women won the right to vote in 1920, the organized women's rights movement in the United States dissipated, and the word *feminism* fell into disuse and ill repute. In the 1960s, a new generation revived the fight for what they now called "women's liberation" and a vision of a world free of domination and subordination. This movement struck a responsive chord for countless women. The feminist movement grew rapidly throughout the 1970s, permeating every aspect of social, political, and cultural life. The new feminist movement has argued that reproductive rights are essential for women's freedom. It has criticized the disadvantaged position of women in the workplace and the subordination of women in the family, pointing out the connection between the place of women in the labor force and in the family. By declaring that "the personal is political," contemporary feminists have brought into the open subjects that previously had been discussed only in whispers, such as sexuality, rape, incestuous sexual abuse, and violence against women. Lesbian and bisexual feminists have pointed out that freedom to love whomever one chooses is an essential element of self-determination. For feminists, all of these struggles are inextricably connected, and changes in all of them are necessary to attain freedom for women.

¹⁰Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 14.

Feminism is continually developing a more multicultural and inclusive perspective, reflecting the lives of women of all races, ethnic groups, and classes. Feminists of varied races and ethnicities are generating theory and practice that address their particular experiences and consciousness, broadening and deepening the scope of feminist analysis. It is important to recognize that although gender affects all of us, these effects are powerfully shaped by other aspects of our experience.

Black feminist thought, for example, reflects the unique position of African-American women in American society. As eloquently expressed by Alice Walker, black feminism, or “womanism,” draws on the historical strength of black women in their families and communities and the rich African-American tradition of resistance, persistence, and survival. By describing “womanist” with a broad brush that celebrates the everyday lives of black girls and women as well as the political implications of their activism, Walker’s definition resonates with the experiences of many black women. African-American feminists have also emphasized the concept of “multiple consciousness” or “intersectionality”: the idea that the distinct systems of racism, sexism, and class oppression interact simultaneously in the lives of women of color in the United States. They have also suggested an African-centered rather than a Eurocentric perspective on the history of women, allowing for an appreciation of the powerful roles that women have played in some African societies.

Jewish feminists have also reclaimed their tradition of Jewish female resistance and have reexamined insulting stereotypes like “pushy Jewish mother” and “Jewish American Princess” to express the legitimacy of female assertiveness. They have revived Rabbi Hillel’s question “If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I?” to explore both the meaning of anti-Semitism for Jewish women and the importance of the connections between different groups of suppressed people. Reflecting on this project, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz has pointed out, “What is best in people is a sturdy connection between respect for the self and respect for the other: reaching in and out at the same time.”¹¹

Asian and Latina feminists have pointed out the tensions between immigrant and U.S. cultures, and the concurrent need to affirm their cultural heritage and reject its sexism. Traditional Japanese culture, for instance, expects women to be docile and to put family honor ahead of their own needs. One’s self is inextricably tied to one’s family; to break away is often viewed as an act of betrayal. Asian-American feminists have also confronted the myths about Asian women’s sexuality, myths that have emerged from an interplay between Western stereotypes and the expectations of women in Asian cultures. Latina feminists have demonstrated the need to negotiate a path between the sometimes conflicting demands of the Latino community’s expectations and female self-determination. Feminism for Latina women, and women of other oppressed groups, means simultaneously working with Latino men against their common oppression and challenging sexist or “macho” attitudes and behavior.

¹¹Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, “To Be a Radical Jew in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Sinister Wisdom* 29–30 (1986), p. 280.

Contemporary American Indian feminists carry many of the traditional values and practices of women-centered Native American cultures into the present. In addition, Native American women's vision of connectedness to the earth and spiritual world, along with a legacy of responsibility toward the environment, are emerging as important concerns for many feminists. For example, ecofeminism addresses the connection between women's oppression and the exploitation of the earth's natural resources, and emphasizes women's role in confronting these environmental issues.

One of the most exciting developments of the past few decades has been the emergence of a powerful transnational feminist movement that has worked throughout the world to challenge violence against women, defend women's rights as human rights, expand the education of girls, champion women's sexual and reproductive freedom, and support women's access to economic independence. The activities and ideas of women throughout the world have enriched and broadened feminist theory and practice contributing to a transnational multicultural feminism aimed at the liberation of all people. To emphasize the diversity within feminism, some scholars have begun to refer to "feminisms."

Speaking up for ourselves is an essential first step for women taking an active role in their education. In the first selection in this chapter, bell hooks writes from the context of the Southern black community in which she grew up, where "talking back" as a girl was an act of daring. It often takes courage for women to speak up for themselves in an educational setting, where male-oriented norms, curricula, and classroom processes often silence women's voices. Mai Kao Thao echoes this message in her essay, "Sins of Silence," as she describes the pain she and other "good Hmong women" have endured when they have kept silent about the realities of their lives.

Adrienne Rich, feminist author and poet, wrote the next selection as an address to a primarily white, female graduating class in 1977. Its message, about the importance of women "claiming an education" that is meaningful to them, continues to be relevant today in any educational setting. Rich provides a personal context for understanding the role of women's studies courses in shaping such an education.

Just as feminism has become more inclusive of women from diverse backgrounds, so too has the content of women's studies expanded over the years, embodying the experiences of women from varying racial, ethnic, and class groups. In their classic essay, Akasha (Gloria) Hull and Barbara Smith place the development of black women's studies in a political and historical context. By highlighting the legacy of black women's struggles to obtain an education during and after slavery, Hull and Smith show us the connection between black women's studies and the politics of oppression.

Originally delivered as a lecture by Michael Kimmel at an anniversary of the women's studies program at a major university, the next essay focuses on men and women's studies. Kimmel begins by stating that "many readers are wondering . . . what I'm doing in such a volume of essays."¹² A sociologist who studies men's relation to

¹²Michael Kimmel, "Men and Women's Studies," in *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys and Political Critiques*, ed. Nancy Hewitt, Jean O'Barr, and Nancy Rosebaugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), p. 153.

feminism, Kimmel gives us another important example of the relevance of women's studies for all students. That relevance extends outside of the borders of the United States. As Heather Hewett observes in the next article, by removing the United States from the center of feminism and reorienting women's studies in terms of transnational questions new stories begin to emerge.

In the next six selections, women's studies students and one instructor speak of the value of a women's studies education to their intellectual, political, and personal lives. Because the authors of each piece come from varied backgrounds, women's studies took on different meaning for each of them.

We end this section with an essay examining the history of women's studies' spectacular growth within American colleges and universities within the last four decades. Marilyn Boxer's essay celebrates this growth and calls for the continued integration of feminist research and teaching into institutions of higher learning.

1

Talking Back

BELL HOOKS

In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, “back talk” and “talking back” meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion. In the “old school,” children were meant to be seen and not heard. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents were all from the old school. To make yourself heard if you were a child was to invite punishment, the back-hand lick, the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs.

To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring. And yet it was hard not to speak in warm rooms where heated discussions began at the crack of dawn, women's voices filling the air, giving orders, making threats, fussing. Black men may have excelled in the art of poetic preaching in the male-dominated church, but in the church of the home, where the everyday rules of how to live and how to act were established, it was black women who preached. There, black women spoke in a language so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate.

It was in that world of woman talk (the men were often silent, often absent) that was born in me the craving to speak, to have a voice, and not just any voice but one that could be identified as belonging to me. To make my voice, I had to speak, to hear myself talk—and talk I did—darting in and out of grown folks' conversations and dialogues, answering questions that were not directed at me, endlessly asking questions, making speeches. Needless to say, the punishments for these acts of speech seemed endless. They were intended to silence me—the child—and more particularly the girl child. Had I been a boy, they might have encouraged me to speak believing that I might someday be called to preach. There was no “calling” for talking girls, no legitimized rewarded speech. The punishments I received for “talking back” were intended to suppress all possibility that I would create my own speech. That speech was to be suppressed so that the “right speech of womanhood” would emerge.

Within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist “right speech of womanhood”—the sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority. This emphasis on woman's silence may be an accurate remembering of what has taken place in the households of women from WASP backgrounds in the United States, but in black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent. Their voices can be heard. Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature